

Infant feeding studied

Mothers asked to avoid formula

Nikki Cobb, Staff Writer- San Bernardino Sun- August 14, 2006

It seems like the most natural thing in the world, and it carries tremendous benefits for mother and baby. Yet just 30.8 percent of San Bernardino County's mothers breast-feed their infants.

The county ranked 40th out of 50 California counties studied in rates of mothers solely breast-feeding, without supplementing it with formula. Experts say if the mother doesn't learn to breast-feed in the hospital, she's unlikely to start at home.

The study by the state Women, Infants and Children program and UC Davis found that although more than 83 percent of women statewide plan to breast-feed their infants, only 40.5 percent do so. Hospital practices contribute heavily to that discrepancy, says the study, released last week.

"Hospitals separate mother and baby, (and) they don't bring the baby to the mother when it shows signs of hunger, but rather feed it a supplement to let the mother rest," said Jane Heinig, executive director of the UC Davis lactation center. "Policies like these can result in a high supplementation rate."

Breast-feeding releases the hormone oxytocin in the mother, which causes her to bond with her baby. She also gets her health back faster, because oxytocin contracts the uterus.

The nursing mother also has a lower risk of developing osteoporosis or breast cancer and is less likely to suffer from postpartum depression, said Dr. Ruth Stanhiser, director of post-medical education in the department of family medicine at Arrowhead Regional Medical Center in Colton.

"There's a long list of benefits," Stanhiser said. "Many for reasons we're not totally clear on."

But the benefits to the baby are even more dramatic. Babies who have been exclusively breast-fed for at least the first six months have higher IQs, a lower risk of becoming overweight or obese later in life, fewer ear and upper respiratory infections, decreased susceptibility to childhood diabetes and stronger immune systems.

"We know that it ends up with better results," said Karen Farley, lactation consultant with California WIC Association. "Kids stay healthier."

No local hospitals ranked in the top 15 of California's highest-scoring hospitals in encouraging breast feeding. Two scored in the bottom 15.

Pomona Valley Hospital Medical Center in Pomona was the eighth-worst in promoting breast feeding. Just 14.5 percent of mothers there chose to breast-feed exclusively.

Hospital spokeswoman Erin Williams said the facility has recently hired several lactation consultants to help new mothers who decide to breast-feed.

Also, Williams said, the staff is working with obstetricians and other physicians to educate women on the benefits of breast-feeding and encouraging them to make a decision before they give birth.

"We've been giving it the full-court press," Williams said. "We do know that breast-feeding is beneficial for everyone."

Community Hospital of San Bernardino also scored in the lowest 15. Only 19.5 percent of new mothers exclusively breast-feed there, which came in tenth from the bottom.

Hospital spokeswoman Tobey Robertson said the hospital has vastly improved its education program since the study was performed. A lactation consultant visits every new mother, she said, and the hospital holds community programs to teach breast feeding in Spanish and in English.

Heinig said ethnicity can play a factor in a mother's decision to breast-feed and in the hospital's treatment of the issue.

Black women are the least likely to breast-feed, Heinig said. Latinos often start using formula early on to supplement nursing, she said.

"It may be in some hospitals there's an assumption made, that they're going to mix feed so (hospitals) don't promote it," Heinig said.

Carol Melcher is the clinical director of the perinatal services network at Loma Linda University Medical Center. She said the network and First 5 of San Bernardino and Riverside Counties are working with 20 hospitals to help them become more supportive of mothers wishing to breast-feed. The program has trained 3,000 nurses in the last five years, she said.

"We have to re-educate the moms and the nurses," Melcher said. "They need to realize that it's really negative to even give the baby a pacifier."